

# International Students' Intention to Pursue Postgraduate Studies in Malaysia: The Moderating Effect of Perceived Overall Tourism Attractiveness

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<https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v19i2.22236>

*Received: 8 April 2021*

*Accepted: 30 March 2023*

*Date Published Online: 30 April 2023*

*Published: 30 April 2023*

**Abstract:** In recent years, international higher education and international students have attracted considerable attention in research. Using education pull factors and its perceived overall tourism attractiveness (POTA), this study aims to examine the moderating effects of POTA in influencing the behavioural intentions of current international students to continue studying in the same host country. A few studies on the pull factors of international higher education often include POTA as one of the independent variables without testing it as a moderating variable, which could enhance its importance rather than overshadow it. Data were collected from a survey of 366 international students at three higher institutions, both public and private universities, offering programmes for undergraduate and postgraduate study. Using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), results confirmed that the pull factors influencing international students to choose the host country are language (English), quality of education, and cultural comfort. It further confirmed that POTA moderates the relationship between host country education pull factors and students' behavioural intentions of choosing the country to further their studies. Thus, besides adding value to literature, tourism attractiveness should not be neglected and should be utilised while marketing education exports to attract international students.

**Keywords:** Host country, International students, Perceived overall tourism attractiveness, Postgraduate, Pull factors.

## 1. Introduction

International education is massifying, commodified, and marketed as an export product worldwide (De Haan, 2015; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023; Soong, 2020) by not only traditional but also non-traditional or considerably "newcomers" education host countries. As it is a big challenge for newcomers, specifically higher institutions, to attract international students, host countries are supporting them to improve their overall attractiveness (Denman & Hilal, 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Host countries realise that education is a business concept, and any positive factors that can pull the market of international students will have economic advantages (Asada, 2019). For a developing and considerably small country like Malaysia, it can boost its economy by strengthening its international education sector by capitalising on its strategic position to become the Asian hub for education (Mohamed, 2020).

According to Mohamed (2020), the then Malaysian Minister of Higher Education, in materialising the aspiration of generating USD3.9 billion (MYR15.6 billion) from 200,000 international students in 2020, the government has proven its commitment through a consistently highest allocation annual budget for the education sector. In 2014, Malaysia was ranked the ninth largest exporter of higher education; the target was to be the sixth by 2020 (UNESCO, 2014). It will probably be an achievable goal without the interference of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overseas applications to Malaysian universities can evidence this surge (Times Higher Education, 2023). The worldwide expansion of demand for tertiary education has fuelled a growing interest in international education. The National Education National Key Economic Area (NKEA) documented the prioritisation of tertiary education for international students based on existing market share and potential for future growth (NKEA Info, 2016). With support and collaboration from the public and private sectors (Nair et al., 2014), Malaysia has paved its way to becoming one of the preferred study destinations in the region, ranked eighth and 38th in Asia and globally, respectively (educations.com, 2020).

From the perspective of higher institutions, getting more international students is essential, as it adds value to their ranking, such as the QS World University Ranking (Quacquarelli Symonds Limited, 2020). Although education is their primary intention in studying in Malaysia, international students may also be motivated by the various travel activities they undertake before, during, and after their studies. However, the role of travel and tourism in the international student experience needs to be better understood (Michael et al., 2004). They further suggested that collaborating with education providers may allow tourism-related businesses to target international students and motivate them to travel more extensively throughout their enrolment.

As the government has identified tourism as one of the significant capital contributors under the NKEA (NKEA Info, 2016), Malaysia has now positioned itself as one of the world's attractive destinations, ranked 15th most visited country in 2018 (UNWTO, 2019), making tourism the third most significant contributor to Malaysia's GDP after manufacturing and commodities (Hirschmann, 2020). The existing Malaysian tourism products range from beautiful natural islands and beaches, outdoor recreation, and historical attractions to artificial attractions of theme parks and grandeur shopping centres and hotel resorts, contributing to the attractiveness. Additionally, Malaysia was able to host several significant international events. Earlier, these products were translated into nine core areas comprising eco-tourism, heritage, sport, homestay, food, golf, coastal and island shopping and health, and meeting and exhibition tourism (Prime Minister's Department, 2010).

Later, Malaysia developed niche tourism products, such as angling, yachting, birding, golfing, cruising, diving, biking, wedding, and honeymoon (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). Moving away from typical tourism products, education tourism started to receive attention to be a global education destination by 2025, with a target of attracting 250,000 international students (Ministry of Education, 2015). Thus, attracting international students is increasingly important, not only for higher education institutions themselves but for the country too. The 2% share of the global international education market (Asar et al., 2017) could be expanded further.

Several studies have investigated the push-pull factors of international students' destination choices. The push factors could be operating within the students or their country of origin. In contrast, pull factors are within the destination country, making the country relatively attractive to international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This study concentrated only on the pull factors, as it is meant to study the host country's education attractiveness and to investigate a moderating factor known as tourism attractiveness. This is because those who study abroad wish to gain different experiences in another country and gain migration opportunities. The ease of travelling and financial capability among international students while studying create further opportunities for the host country to attract this niche segment (Zheng, 2014). However, a limited study focuses specifically on tourism attractiveness and how it moderates the relationship between the pull factors of international higher education and international students' behavioural intentions in choosing the country as a host. Thus, the main aim of this study is to examine the influence of perceived overall tourism attractiveness (POTA) in moderating the relationship between the pull factors that influence international students in choosing a country as a host for their higher education destination. In the process, the list of pull factors is confirmed.

The context of this study is international students in a developing country simultaneously excelling in attracting international tourists to Malaysia. This country used to be top 10 in the UNWTO list of most visited countries for four years consecutively, from 2009 to 2012 (UNWTO, 2010–13),

before it was hit with the double air crash tragedies, followed by a few unwelcoming incidents (Surendra, 2015) till the COVID-19 pandemic, which is affecting the whole world. The results of this study will be an additional input to other countries that have tourism attractiveness and aim to increase the number of international students.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 International Higher Education

International students are “students that leave their country or territory of origin and move to another country or territory to study” (UNESCO, 2009, p.36). Internationally, the enrolment of international students is expected to quadruple from 1.8 million in 2000 to 7.2 million in 2025. Approximately 70% of the total demand will come from Asia, especially China, India, and Islamic countries (Lam et al., 2011). International higher education has become a part of the broader globalisation process (Sharipov, 2020). Since 2012, Malaysia has been fast becoming the destination for international students seeking higher education and witnessing an increasing influx of international students, mostly from developing countries within and outside Asia (Biodun et al., 2012).

Table 1 shows Malaysia's total number of international student enrolments from 163 countries worldwide. Compared to 2016, an increment of 7.5% of 3,583 international students enrolled in Malaysia was recorded. Bangladesh was at the top of the list, followed by China, Nigeria, Indonesia, Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq, Sudan, and Iran (Ministry of Education, 2019).

**Table 1.** Student Enrolment in Malaysia

Level of Study	Number of Students		Total
	Public University	Private Universities	
Undergraduates	14,075	82,249	96,324
Postgraduates	10,949	10,166	21,115
Total	25,024	92,415	117,439

Source: Ministry of Higher Education (2019)

International education is called “study abroad” and refers to travelling internationally for educational purposes. The potential benefits of studying abroad have been well documented, including improved intercultural competence, language development, increased global understanding and appreciation, identity achievement, and added competitiveness for employment opportunities (Stone et al., 2017).

Among ASEAN countries, only Malaysia and Singapore featured in the top 10 of the Baseline Profitability Index (BPI) (Altman, 2015). This BPI conveys that Malaysia provides a friendly business environment, making it an attractive place to invest in education franchises. The initiative has been made, such as international education destinations like Malaysia; students receive a pack of core educational services at their respective institutions, but the country provides the periphery services related to their stay in Malaysia. These include security, infrastructure, socials, sports, and recreation. All these macroeconomic variables influence students’ loyalty and decision-making (Cubillo et al., 2006).

### 2.2 Host Country Education Pull Factors

Pull factors in this study refer to factors in a host country making the country relatively attractive to international students (Chemsripong, 2019; Zulkifli et al., 2020). Host country education pull factors are sometimes studied as the perceived image of international higher education destination and have been studied from various perspectives, covering both direct and indirect variables to academic and is paraphernalia, such as university attractiveness and wide range of courses (Asar et al., 2017; Bayyurt, 2020; Falk & Hagsten, 2019; Moreira & Gomes, 2018; Wilkins & Huisman, 2013); quality of education (Ali et al., 2016; Foo et al., 2016; Ghazarian, 2016; Wen & Hu, 2019); suitable cultural,

social, and linguistic backgrounds (Mahmoud et al., 2020; Mun et al., 2018); value for money (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Asar et al., 2017; Wiers-Jenssen, 2019); strategic location (Fenyves et al., 2019); safety and security (Ahmad et al., 2016; Asar et al., 2017; Paulino & Castaño, 2019); and government policy (Hobsons, 2016). These studies are researched from the perspectives of previous, existing, or potential international students, as perceptions of satisfaction are derived from the demand side (Ammigan, 2019).

The host country's overall tourism attractiveness construct in academic literature is sometimes omitted or only slightly discussed. This would be misleading in modelling pull factors against the behavioural intentions of the international in choosing the host country of their higher education institution for both sides, either demand (international students) or supply (host countries) side, especially for a country like Malaysia, which was ranked 15th in the absolute world terms (WorldData.info, 2020). Tourism, understood as life outside the classroom for international students, is essential (Ziguras & Harwood, 2011).

The other five dimensions listed by EMGS that are considered conservative: are world-class universities, affordability, widely spoken English, a modern and progressive country, and is the world's top peaceful and prosperous country. These dimensions are being applied in this study and renamed consistent with literature reviews' pull factors, such as language, value for money, quality of education, safe environment, and cultural comfort (Asar et al., 2017; Ghazarian, 2016; Lam et al., 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Mun et al., 2018; Chong & Mokhtar, 2014; Ramburuth & Tani, 2009).

### **2.3 Perceived Overall Tourism Attractiveness (POTA)**

Malaysia as a tourism destination is well accepted globally, proven by the number of international tourist arrivals and receipts (UNWTO, 2020). Additionally, several global recognitions based on various attraction categories have been given to the country by various international organisations since 2012 (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). Among a few international recognitions given to Malaysia in 2020 include the following: No. 2 as one of the friendliest cities in the world Top 50; No. 14 as one of the most photogenic countries in the World Top 50; No.7 World's 10 Best Places to Retire 2020; and No. 14 as one of the most photogenic countries in the world Top 50 (Tourism Malaysia, 2020).

There are quite some studies on Malaysia's attractiveness, and most place dimensions of attractiveness as independent variables. There are studies on its attractiveness from the perspective of international visitors on various types of tourism, ranging from nature to build tourism, archaeology, and heritage to contemporary tourism, short- to long-term tourism generic to niche tourism and from urban to rural tourism (Aminudin & Abd Rahman, 2016; Buliah et al., 2018; Jusoh et al., 2017; Nasir et al., 2020; Rahmadani & Ahmad, 2018; Sivadasan, 2017; Wong, Musa, & Taha, 2017).

However, the inclusiveness of perceived overall tourism attractiveness in higher education destinations is limited. Initial studies on factors influencing international students' choice of an education destination include conservative dimensions, as mentioned in the above sub-segment. The host country's perceived overall tourism attractiveness has yet to be studied as a construct to analyse its impact. As the focus of international students has changed from international aid to international trade (He & Banham, 2011), the importance of life outside the classroom (Ammigan, 2019), and the reports of increased rates of mental ill health among international students compared with domestic students (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2019), timely tourism attractiveness is highlighted in influencing international destination choice.

### **2.4 Behavioural Intentions and Moderating Variable**

This study uses respondents' behavioural intentions, an attitudinal approach measured based on intention to further their study in the host country. Foo et al. (2016) conducted a similar study by applying the educational choice model but perceived overall tourism attractiveness is omitted. The pull factors' effect on behavioural intentions to study in the current host destination is similar to previous studies (Denman & Hilal, 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Zulkifli et al., 2020). International students with favourable image perception will likely remain and recommend the country in line with loyalty theory (Nguyen & Le Blanc, 2001). The greater the positive image, the greater the intention to remain

in the current destination to further their studies. Among the factors that influence the perception to include a comfortable study environment, high-quality services and facilities, excellent faculty members, and easy access to information regarding matters related to education significantly influence the students' decision to further their studies in the current destination (Foo et al., 2016; Latip, Newaz & Ramasamy, 2020)

The testing of POTA as a moderating variable will be the contribution of this study, as it will enhance the understanding of the role of POTA on behavioural intentions among current international students further to continue their study in the existing host country. One of the advantages of knowing the moderating variable is that it provides answers to the questions “when” and “for whom” a variable will most strongly predict or cause an outcome (Baron & Kenny, 1986). This study refers to whether the moderating variable of POTA increases the strength of the relationship between the pull factors and behavioural intentions. Consequently, the hypotheses of this study are as follows:

H1 Host country education pull factors positively and significantly affect international students' behavioural intentions.

H1a Host country education pull factor of English language usage positively and significantly affects international students' behavioural intentions.

H1b Host country education pull factor of value for money positively and significantly affects international students' behavioural intentions.

H1c Host country education pull factor of the quality of education has a positive and significant effect on international students' behavioural intentions.

H1d Host country education pull factor of a safe environment positively and significantly affects international students' behavioural intentions.

H1e Host country education pull factor of cultural comfort positively and significantly affects international students' behavioural intentions.

H2 Perceived overall tourism attractiveness moderates the relationship between the host country's education pull factors and behavioural intentions.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Study area and sample**

The sample was drawn from international students currently studying at public or private universities, comprising undergraduate and graduate programmes. Three universities were selected due to high international student enrolment in 2019: International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), University of Malaya, and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) ([worldscholarshipforum.com](http://worldscholarshipforum.com), 2019). This study focused on a single region, Klang Valley, the centre of Malaysia, where all three universities were located.

Due to the data confidentiality of the international students from the universities, the sampling frame is unavailable. Thus, a non-probability technique and a convenience sampling design were applied. Further, a deliberate effort was made to obtain an appropriate sample through a snowballing network of friends and relatives. The snowball sampling method integrates initial convenience sampling. International student gatherings and activities were attended, and nearly 100% of approached students were helpful and cooperative.

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

The data for this study were obtained by a questionnaire-based survey conducted over three months (data were collected before the first Malaysian movement control order, from December 2019 to February 2020). Structured, self-administered questionnaires were prepared in English and distributed to 450 international students. The data collection modes include online and onsite (events involving international students). Three hundred seventy-five questionnaires were returned with a response rate of 83.33%, and nine questionnaires were excluded because of missing values.

Of the respondents included in the study ( $n = 366$ ; male students outnumbered female students, 60.11%–39.89%), 31% were Bangladeshi, 25% Chinese, 21% Indonesian, 9% were Nigerian, and 14%

were from Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Maldives, Yemen, Iran, and Oman. The age range of 18–24 was the largest group of respondents at 73% (n = 267), followed by respondents aged between 25–34 at 27% (n = 99). Most students studied at degree level for at least one semester in Malaysia (screening level requirement), while the rest were at their master’s level. Of tourism and leisure activities undertaken, all had taken at least one trip to places out of their universities’ state.

#### 4. Results and Analysis

Three constructs are detailed in this study: international students' assessment of the host country's education pull factors, perceived overall tourism attractiveness, and behavioural intentions of the international students to continue studying in the host country. The pull factors were operationalised as a multidimensional construct. Five dimensions were derived from previous studies, and the reliability coefficient showed the consistency of the entire scale with Cronbach's alpha for all five dimensions as follows: language,  $\alpha = 0.81$ ; value for money,  $\alpha = 0.79$ ; quality of education,  $\alpha = 0.78$ ; safe environment  $\alpha = 0.80$ ; and cultural comfort,  $\alpha = 0.81$ .

POTA and behavioural intentions were operationalised by three items, adapted from Aminudin and Abd Rahman (2016) and modified to become a unidimensional item reviewed by tourism academics and practitioners. The constructs offered strong reliability with Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = 0.78$  and  $\alpha = 0.76$ , respectively. The scales selected from the literature were modified to suit this study, and all indicators were measured by Likert's five-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to evaluate the overall measurement model with the parameter estimated using maximum likelihood estimation (MLE). Primarily, the overall fit of the hypothetical model was tested. As shown in Table 2, the chi-square statistic was significant ( $\chi^2 = 423.12$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), and the ratio of the  $\chi^2$  value to degrees of freedom ( $\chi^2/df = 2.51$ ) was less than 3, consistent with the Bagozzi and Yi (1988) cut-off point. The goodness-of-fit index (GFI = 0.93) and the comparative-fit index (CFI = 0.92) were greater than the suggested value of 0.9. The root-mean-square approximation error (RMSEA = 0.055) was 0.03–0.08. Overall, the model fits the data well. As shown in Table 3, the entire critical ratio (t values) for the factor loading of all measurement items ranged from 10.16 to 25.09, indicating statistical significance ( $p = 0.001$ ). All the variance-extracted estimates exceeded the 50% rule (ranging from 0.80 to 0.87).

The construct reliabilities ranged from 0.91 to 0.94, and all exceeded 0.7, suggesting adequate reliability. This result showed the adequacy of each multi-item scale in capturing its respective construct, thus supporting the convergent validity of the overall measurement model. Table 3 shows the discriminant validity by examining the covariance between the constructs, expressed as correlations. The correlations assessed the exclusivity between constructs. This study's results showed that most of the correlation coefficients were significant at 0.001 (Hair et al., 2006), and these results were in the expected direction. Thus, the discriminant validity was supported.

**Table 2.** The goodness of fit: Overall measurement model

Construct (N = 366)	Dimension	Scale item – Description	Standard factor loading	t-Value	CR	AV E
PFE	LAG	lag1 – English is a widely spoken language	0.83 <sup>a</sup>	-	0.92	0.82
		lag2 – Interested in improving the English language	0.82	17.53		
		lag3 – English as a communication language	0.86	18.14		
VFM	VFM	vfm2 – Reasonable cost of living	0.71	16.87	0.91	0.85
		vfm3 – Reasonable cost of tuition fees	0.86 <sup>a</sup>	-		
		vfm4 – Reasonable cost of books	0.77	10.67		
		vfm5 – Reasonable cost of public transportation	0.81	18.45		
QOE	QOE	qoe2 – Standard of education is accepted in my home country	0.76 <sup>a</sup>	-	0.94	

Construct (N = 366)	Dimension	Scale item – Description	Standard factor loading	t-Value	CR	AV E
		qoe3 – Beneficial and relevant courses	0.77	15.69		
		qoe4 – Duration of programme	0.75	15.68		
		qoe5 – Lecturers are qualified in their fields	0.74	15.02		
		qoe7 – Lecturers are fluent in English	0.73	15.76		
	SEV	sev1 – Political stability	0.69	14.56	0.93	0.86
		sev2 – Safe country	0.89 <sup>a</sup>	-		
		sev3 – Personal safety	0.70	15.69		
	CCF	ccf1 – Understanding of other cultures	0.95	25.68	0.94	0.80
		ccf2 – Comfortable with other culture	0.94 <sup>a</sup>	-		
		ccf3 – Enjoy a cultural experience	0.88	16.67		
OTA	Unidimensional	ota1 – Tourism attractions are affordable	0.84 <sup>a</sup>	-	0.92	0.87
		ota2 – Various tourist attractions visit	0.84	18.17		
		ota3 – Tourism attractions are within reach over the weekend	0.79	19.35		
BIN	Unidimensional	bin1 – I plan to continue my study at this university	0.81	17.56	0.92	0.81
		bin2 – I plan to continue my study at another university in this country	0.85 <sup>a</sup>	-		
		bin3 – I plan to take a short break and continue studying here.	0.85	18.51		

Fit statistics  
 $\chi^2 = 423.12$  (p = 0.000)  
 $\chi^2/df = 2.51$  (df = 212)  
 GFI = 0.93  
 CFI = 0.92  
 RMSEA = 0.055  
 Note: a Fixed parameter

**Table 3.** Correlations: Overall measurement model

Construct	LAG	VFM	QOE	SEV	CCF	OTA	BIN
LAG	1.000						
VFM	.828	1.000					
QOE	.814	.865	1.000				
SEV	.765	.743	.758	1.000			
				0			
CCF	.654	.656	.633	.687	1.000		
				0			
OTA	.832	.683	.604	.657	.658	1.000	
BIN	.798	.611	.634	.619	.622	.697	1.000

Note: \*\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.000 level (two-tailed).

#### 4.1 Structural Model and Test of Hypothesis 1

In examining the hypothesised relationship between the international students' assessment of the host country's education pull factors (PFE) and behavioural intentions to study further (BIN), the

CFA and p-value based on regression weight analysis were used. The hypothesised direction between constructs was determined from the correlational effect between the exogenous variable (PFE) and endogenous variable (BIN). PFE as a pull factor was treated as one (summarising the expected variation in a collection of indicators), and simultaneously each indicator was tested individually according to a formative model. The final estimated structural model was reported in Table 3 for the model's coefficients and goodness-of-fit statistics. The structural model showed acceptable fit indices ( $\chi^2/df = 2.214$ , TLI = 0.943, CFI = 0.953, and RMSEA = 0.060), explaining considerable variance in all five indicators. The hypothesised relationships were supported in the estimated structural model. It was observed that the international students' assessment of the pull factors positively influenced their behavioural intentions ( $\beta = 0.75$ , p-value = \*\*\*), thereby supporting H1.

#### 4.2 Moderating Effects and Test of Hypothesis 2

Initial R<sup>2</sup> of 0.47 of the contribution of the exogenous construct (PFE) and endogenous (BIN) indicates that the moderator effect of POTA could increase or decrease the value of the coefficient of determination. In testing the role of POTA as a moderating variable, Hair et al.'s (2006) technique, where a two-group model, was tested based on international students' high and low POTA (high, n = 232; low = 134). The first model allowed the hypothesised relationship to be estimated freely (unconstrained). Subsequently, a second model was tested with constraints added and equalising hypothesised relationships in both models of high and low perceptions of POTA. The change in the chi-square ( $\Delta\chi^2$ ) can estimate the effect on fit. The results are significant when it shows that constraining the relationship to be equal in both groups negatively affects the model fit, indicating that moderation is supported, as shown in Table 4, thereby supporting H2.

**Table 4.** Results of the structural model

Hypothesised paths	Hypothesised direction	Standardised estimates	p-value	Hypothesis testing
H <sup>1</sup> PFE→BIN	+	.751	***	Supported
H <sup>1a</sup> LAG→BIN	+	.710	***	Supported
H <sup>1b</sup> VFM→BIN	+	.103	.379	Not supported
H <sup>1c</sup> QOE→BIN	+	.742	.645	Supported
H <sup>1d</sup> SEV→BIN	+	.110	.019	Not Supported
H <sup>1e</sup> CCF→BIN	+	.830	.604	Supported
OTA moderates PFE→BIN	+	$\Delta\chi^2 = 21.98$		Supported

#### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The international students from the four universities have identified three dimensions of the host country's education pull factors: quality of education, language, and cultural comfort, which positively and significantly affect behavioural intentions. The findings are consistent with a recent study by Kenfack and Öztüren (2021) and another study by Foo et al. (2016). This finding also extends the perception that whether the host country is known as a tourism destination or otherwise, international students still emphasise the importance of quality education, language and cultural comfort.

The finding of this study highlights the importance of quality of education among international students in deciding to study further. Previous studies supported this and identified the quality of education as one of the vital factors in sustaining the country as an education hub (Cheng, Mahmood, & Yeap, 2013; Chong & Mokhtar, 2014; Mohamed, 2020). Education standard or academic criteria has always been critical in students' choice to further their studies (Azman & Aziz, 2006; Chong & Mokhtar, 2014). The indicator highlighted previously was an international ranking which continues to be increasingly important (Sheriff & Abdullah, 2017). Many Malaysian universities have been listed in the QS global university ranking, which adds value to the perception of the quality of education in Malaysia. The University of Malaya was ranked 70th globally, UIA top 700 and UTAR top 1,000 (QS World University Rankings, 2020).

Next, language (specifically English) was considered an important selection criterion for the international students' decision to further their studies in this country. Malaysia has the advantage as most of its university teaching and learning is in English. Additionally, most Malaysians are at least bilingual due to the British legacy. This adds to the cultural comfort as the international students must be independent and mix well with the local community. The findings revealed that cultural comfort significantly influences international students' decision to study further. As Malaysia has a multicultural population with varieties of food, beliefs, and high tolerance among the people of this country, the international students and tourists found it comforting to stay and further their studies here.

Thus, establishing the Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) in 2012, tasked to manage the movement of international students and promote the country, is considered a success. Among the reasons identified by EMGS in supporting why Malaysia should be chosen as an international higher education destination were synchronised with the study finding: English is widely spoken, as well as a multicultural society and food heaven.

Finally, the findings of this study suggest that tourism attractiveness is a moderating variable in understanding international students' behavioural intentions. Therefore, host countries and universities should use tourism attractiveness when marketing international education. Destination management organisations and tourism attractions may also use pricing strategies to attract international students already in the country. Short and reasonably priced leisure trips would be attractive to international students who are away from their country of origin and facing the pressure of their academic lives.

Thus, the existence of EMGS remain relevant as long as it continues to promote the country's attractiveness that is related to tourism: multicultural society and food heaven (students would be able to experience and live among people with different language, culture, and heritage—a wide range of lifestyles, religions, and communities); dynamic lifestyle (referring to Malaysia has a reputation as one of the world's top tourist destinations (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023), popular for its ecotourism hotspot where many activities can be undertaken); and strategic location (referring to Malaysia is strategically located as the tourist hotspot in Asia).

## 6. Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that this article has no conflict of interest. **Norliza:** Conceptualization and Methodology. **Siti Aisyah:** Data collection, Analysis, Writing- Original draft preparation. **Salamiah:** Validation, Writing- Reviewing and Editing.

## 7. Acknowledgements

This study was made possible by financial support from the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (Grant: FRGS/1/2021/SS0/UITM/02/11). We express our gratitude to Universiti Teknologi MARA UiTM for their continuous support, which has been integral to the success of this research project.

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